

Bobby Russell



On the day Bobby Russell made his Rangers debut – Saturday, August 13, 1977 – Showaddywaddy were at number three in the charts with the smash hit single ‘You Got What It Takes’. It wouldn’t be too long till we discovered that here was one talented Glaswegian who certainly had what it takes to carve out a successful football career.

Plucked from the relative obscurity of Shettleston Juniors, Russell would go on to become one of the finest midfielders of his generation, winning seven major honours with the Light Blues. Sadly, his time at Rangers would come to an abrupt end when he was moved on following a problematic knee injury – although the player found a second wind at Motherwell, and had five enjoyable years at Fir Park.

He said: “I only played two games under Graeme Souness; the first game of the season and then against Tampere in Finland in the second leg of the UEFA Cup first round, and then I was out for seven months with an injury. That was the beginning of the end for me.”

Long before that, though, Russell had rubber-stamped his place in Rangers’ history by proving his class time and time again in the famous light blue jersey. It almost seems the travesty of the 20th Century that his international appearances were limited to just a few caps for the under-21s.

But when the midfield ace was plying his trade in the juniors at Greenfield Park, he always hoped that one day he would get a move up to the seniors – although he didn’t think it would happen to a couple of Shettleston players at the same time.

He explained: “I knew from reading the sports pages that Rangers were interested in me. At that time, Joe Coyle was also playing for Shettleston and there was interest from Celtic for him. With the two of us under the microscope, we used to see wee bits and pieces in the paper about the Old Firm supposedly keeping tabs on us.

“But around that time I also had a chance to go to Clydebank. I had a trial with them on the Saturday afternoon, and then a run-out with Rangers the following midweek, and the funny thing was that both matches were against Dundee United reserves. I know Clydebank wanted to sign me but I had promised Rangers’ scout Lawrie Cummings that I would have a trial with them. Rangers then offered me a contract so there was absolutely no decision to make – I was going to Ibrox!

“I bumped into the Clydebank chairman, Jack Steedman, a couple of years ago and he said to me, ‘I know you went to Rangers for more money,’ and I told him nothing could have been further from the truth. I said to him, ‘Rangers offered me a signing-on fee of £250, and you offered me £1,500, so it definitely wasn’t about the money!’

“When it came to choosing between Clydebank and Rangers, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and my decision wasn’t based on money.”

But despite being well aware that Rangers were watching him in action for Shettleston, Russell insists there was no extra pressure on his youthful shoulders.

He said: “I knew through the stories in the press that Rangers were coming to watch me but I was only 18 or 19 at the time so it wasn’t exactly a heavy burden on my mind. When you’re that age, it’s a case of what will be will be. It’s sort of outwith your control so you tend not to overthink things.

“But I was playing for Shettleston one afternoon when I saw this man coming towards me. He was real old school and had a Crombie coat and trilby hat on. It was Lawrie Cummings and he approached me before the kick-off. He introduced himself as Rangers’ chief scout and asked if I would like a trial, and it took me all of one second to say yes! It was then that I started to get excited.

“When I signed for Rangers, I more or less went straight into the first team and we won a treble in my first season – and how do you better that? Well, we nearly did, as we had a great run in Europe the following season AND we should have won the treble again, but all the games seemed to catch up with us and it drifted away. Basically I could have started with back-to-back trebles, but unfortunately we lost the deciding game to Celtic at Parkhead.”

Although he no doubt worked as hard as the next guy, Russell always came across as one of the most naturally gifted players of his generation; the Scottish midfielder who wouldn’t have looked out of place playing for peak-time Barcelona, but there is one moment in particular which more than anything else defines his career.

Wednesday, November 1, 1978. PSV Eindhoven v Rangers in a European Cup tie in the Phillips Stadium; the arena in which the Dutch masters had never lost a European game – until Russell and co arrived for the second round, second leg match. The first game at Ibrox had ended goalless and with just a few minutes of the game in Eindhoven remaining, it was 2-2, when Tommy McLean picked up the ball in his own half, out wide. Moments later, Russell begins a lung-bursting run from the edge of his own box, receives a pin-point pass and runs on to bend the ball round the goalkeeper and into the back of the net. Rangers were in the quarter-finals, and knocking out PSV – the UEFA Cup holders – was one of the club’s best ever results on the continent.

Russell said: “I suppose I will forever be associated with that game. Nobody gave us a chance in Eindhoven but we turned in a great performance that night. Mind you, we were one goal down after about 20 seconds, so perhaps those who thought we would fail were about to be proved right. But we did very well to come back and win, although a lot of that was down to the experience we had in the team. I’m convinced that helped get us through.

“Alex MacDonald scored a great goal that night, and then Derek Johnstone managed to get his head to a free-kick and knock it in, and of course my goal was just the icing on the cake. Whenever I do

hospitality at Ibrox, people often talk about that goal and some will joke and say, 'where would you be without that goal?' I suppose the answer is I managed to score another 46 for Rangers!

"But back to the goal in Eindhoven and I bet John Greig, who was manager at the time, was pulling his hair out wondering what I was doing charging forward like that because there was only a few minutes to go and a 2-2 draw was good enough to see us through to the next round on the away goals rule.

"People have asked why I did it, but you don't know, it's just something you either do or don't. You try and reflect and go through the movements leading up to the goal, but I think it was basically because Tommy McLean had the ball. Had it been anyone else, like Tam Forsyth for example, and no disrespect to the big man, I wouldn't have made the run, because the chances of him playing the pass perfectly would have been a wee bit non-existent, but wee Tam could put the ball on a sixpence. That probably helped make my mind up, as well as seeing the PSV defence running out.

"But you also do something like that instinctively, because you can't afford to think about these things too long. And when the ball went in, all the pressure on us was lifted, so it was worth the gamble."

Russell enjoyed playing under John Greig and his successor, Jock Wallace. But he believes it was inconsistency that played a part in the latter's eventual downfall.

He said: "Initially, when Jock came back to the club, there was an upturn in our fortunes, and he got the belief back into the team and we were going great. On our day we were capable of beating anyone, but it was a lack of consistency that was our problem. We were losing and drawing games we shouldn't have, where wins would have had us up there challenging for the league.

"Apart from winning the league in my first season, and then going close the season after, we were never really in contention for the eight seasons that followed. And because we were capable of beating anyone in a one-off game, we probably became known as a cup team, which isn't really good enough at a big club like Rangers."

But when Graeme Souness arrived at Ibrox, Russell admitted it sent a massive tremor rippling through the game north of the border. He knew there and then that everything was about to change.

He said: "When Souness took over it was a big, big shock. I first heard the murmurs about him coming when we were in at Ibrox getting ready to go and play in a reserve match at Kilbowie. The rumour was doing the rounds that Souness was upstairs, and that he was to be the next manager, but we just all thought there was no chance of it happening.

"But it happened alright, and when it did it was a bit like taking the team into the unknown. The first thing we all started thinking was that there would be massive changes, and if I remember correctly the World Cup was taking place that close season. I was a good friend of Davie Cooper's and he told me that Walter Smith had been asking him a lot of questions about the players already at Ibrox, and I know Davie recommended to Walter that he kept me on.

"But it was a big change for all the players who were already there, as all of a sudden we were wearing flip-flops in the changing room and eating pasta for lunch! Some of the boys then started coming in with wee bags containing shampoo and brylcream etc, so it was definitely changed days, but it was certainly a more professional way to go about our business.

"I think the timing of the change was probably right, but did the change need to be so dramatic, I'm not so sure. Money and wages started to spiral out of control, and I don't know if that was altogether a good thing. In hindsight I suppose it's easy enough saying now that perhaps it wasn't

the best way to go about things, but it happened and it changed Scottish football, although we might still be suffering the consequences.

“After I left to go to Motherwell, I heard rumours that certain players were on £30k a week, tax free, and all that kind of stuff. Now I don’t know if it was true, but it was certainly doing the rounds at the time. If it’s true, or even almost true, then it’s unbelievable – and unsustainable.”

Russell added: “Graeme Souness was absolutely fine with me. I only played a couple of games under him and when I was coming back from injury, I hurt my knee again and my contract was about due up. He told me to go and see a specialist, see how it was, and then go and negotiate terms with another club and he would give me a free transfer, so I was happy with that and it worked out fine. I went to Motherwell and had five good years, so to get five years with the chronic knee condition I had was a bonus for me.

“When I first went to Fir Park I was keen to do well, but not to prove Souness or anyone else wrong. The only person I wanted to prove anything to was myself. I wanted to get myself to a decent level of fitness and knew that if I did that, I could still play a bit.

“When I was 21 I tore my cruciate knee ligaments, which was a career-threatening injury, and in those days they opened you up and took away the offending cartilage or ligaments and that was that. I was told at the time not to play on, because my knee was so unstable, but I wasn’t having that and worked hard to build up the muscle. One thing I had in my favour was that I wasn’t carrying much weight. I think had I been carrying another stone-and-a-half then I would have been struggling big time.

“But something like that makes you work harder and you do things you probably wouldn’t normally do, like take on extra training. A lot of people don’t know about the knee problem when I was 21 because the club didn’t broadcast it at the time.

“I suffered the injury against Fortuna Dusseldorf in 1979. I was out for eight weeks and when I made my comeback, I managed about four or five games before it went again. Overall I’ve had about five or six operations on it.

“I used to play in charity matches but I don’t now because I can hardly walk for about a week after it. It’s just not worth it to me. Inside your head you still think you should be doing the things you did 30 years ago but the legs simply don’t work the same, so you’re kidding yourself on. So there definitely comes a time when you can’t even take part in bounce games, but I’m okay with that.”

Russell will rightly be remembered for his decade with Rangers, although he admits when the time came to walk away from Rangers for the final time, it was incredibly hard – although one thing made it just that bit easier.

He explained: “I knew it would be tough, because Rangers had been a massive part of my life. But if the truth be told, I wasn’t completely happy there at the end. I wasn’t quoted. I knew I wasn’t wanted anymore because when I was making my way back from the injury, Motherwell came in for me and the club agreed to let me go. I couldn’t agree personal terms but that was the moment I realised Rangers didn’t want me at Ibrox anymore, and if you’re not wanted then it’s time to leave.

“But I didn’t leave with a sour taste in my mouth, or with any bad feeling, which was important. I went to Motherwell and I enjoyed it. I struggled a wee bit at the start but then with the help of the physio John Hart, I started getting my fitness levels back, and started acupuncture on my knee, which made a big difference.

“I went through a period where I was doing really well and the knee was holding up, but like everything else it eventually catches up with you, although when it did, the timing was lousy. It was just before the Scottish Cup final of 1991, and it was all down to wear and tear, but I missed out on

the cup final because of it, and that's a major regret because I had played in every round leading up to the final.

"Having already won the Scottish Cup and League Cup with Rangers, it was slightly different with Motherwell, because it was a big thing for the town. It was also a major achievement for the club and people lined the streets to watch the open-top bus go past, but I missed out on all that which was very disappointing. Still, I had a great career, with far more high points than low ones."